## History and a Story of Polio: Using and Abusing Oral History Interviews

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Widely hailed as telling the story of polio "from epidemic to cure," the documentary, *A Paralyzing Fear: The Story of Polio in America* by Nina Gilden Seavey and Paul Wagner (The Center for Media, George Washington University) demonstrates by acts of both commission and omission that oral history interviews have an important role to play in the study of disability history. The first person accounts of polio survivors that are inserted throughout the film give an immediacy to the events being examined and to a limited degree allow events to be seen from the survivors' perspective. Images of survivors and the words they utter appear at the beginning and end of the documentary. That could create the impression that survivors' stories are central to what the documentary makers insist is the story of polio in America - but that is at best a partial truth.

Images of American cities before World War I, of Franklin Roosevelt and Warm Springs, and of Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin along with the words of interviewees and the narrator Olympia Dukakis move the story along. This professionally edited documentary blends film footage from the past, photographs, and interviews to construct two narrative lines that dominate the film. One narrative line focuses on the cultural and social history of the paralyzing fear, the other on the struggle of scientists to create a vaccine. The use of oral history interviews both as an opening and concluding frame, and throughout the documentary, may give many viewers the impression that the story of the survivors is the third narrative line. And I suspect that this is what the creators of this documentary thought they were doing. Nevertheless, the snippets taken from oral history interviews with polio survivors focus only on the intersection between the story of the survivors and the other two narratives. Viewers hear from the survivors mainly about the moment when they acquired polio and the treatment they received.

In *A Paralyzing Fear*, the stories of survivors are only what newspapers call a side bar. More is at stake here then a matter of the producers not being able to do everything in a sixty minute documentary. Rather, their approach not only virtually silences survivors accounts of being disabled in an ableist society, but also makes for a severely limited and flawed account of the cultural and social history of polio. The view that winning the scientific battle against polio is the capstone to a happy end to the story would not be so easy to offer viewers if the survivors had been able to speak about their disability experience. Finally, this happy ending is compatible with the view that all that confronts Americans now is the challenge of making the polio vaccine available in the third world so "we" will no longer have to listen to polio survivors regret the impact of the disease on their lives. The regrets the survivors express at the end of the documentary may be more a product of the interviewers focus than of the interviewees concerns, although excerpts from interviews that eliminate the interviewer's questions can easily create the opposite impression. Eliciting from the viewer sadness over what is perceived as solely individual tragedies that cannot be corrected is quite compatible with a sense of an American triumph. Olympia Dukakis's reference to the "we [who] have forgotten" makes it clear that what poses in the film as an objective omniscient narrator's authoritative account is actually a projection of the producer's perspective as detached, impartial, and universally valid.

There are numerous points in this film where the cultural and social history of polio would have been greatly strengthened if the experience of disabled survivors had been explored in greater depth. We hear the voice of a polio survivor who had been a member of the school marching band when he contracted polio. We do not, however, learn what happened to his relationships as a person with a disability to his peers who did not contract polio. Did he return to his school? If he did, how

was that negotiated in terms of whatever physical and cultural barriers may have existed? Some will argue that telling the story from the angle of the survivors would distort the history of polio. But as historian Glenda Gilmore writes in the context of her study of Gender and Jim Crow, *Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*, "I would reply that historical re-vision is long overdue." This documentary has failed to include location as a central component of world view. It has not examined the complexity and contingency of polio survivors negotiating life as individuals with disabilities. More importantly, *A Paralyzing Fear* does not recognize that disability is a social construction which has a history. This history has involved a discourse among both disabled and able-bodied individuals - a discourse in which the boundaries between these categories have been negotiated, contested, and transgressed.

A cultural and social history of polio that ignores the perspective of disabled individuals cannot reveal much about the history of the able-bodied. Rather, the history of survivors is over determined as personal tragedy - and this perspective, this cultural assumption, makes it difficult to understand the paralyzing fear as a cultural phenomenon that deeply affected the lives of most Americans during the height of the epidemic. Beginning with a leg brace floating ominously across the screen as an introductory image, *A Paralyzing Fear* uses what would be today called assistive technology to create a sense of dread. It does not seem to cross the minds of those who created this documentary that braces, wheelchairs, and iron lungs could be regarded as empowering by those who used them. While this attitude toward technology and disability may provide a reflection of widely shared fears, it does little to analyze those fears as cultural attitudes that affected the relationships between those who were disabled by polio and other able-bodied Americans.

Many viewers will be reassured and heartened by a narrative of the progressive triumph of scientific knowledge overcoming a paralyzing ignorance and fear. The absence of interviews that seek to capture the disability history of the survivors and the social construction of disability that they had to deal with in their culture makes possible a stereotypically optimistic American view of history as onward and upward, better and better with each passing day. It also prevents viewers from recognizing a more problematic past and a challenging present and future. In not using oral history interviews to explore the lived experience of polio survivors, *A Paralyzing Fear* allows non-disabled Americans to avoid confronting their own attitudes toward disability. Nor do they have to confront a history of polio that acknowledged a history of discrimination toward individuals with disabilities.

True, there is an important and disconcerting reference in the documentary to the fact that the third world has only recently seen massive polio vaccination campaigns. No interpretation of this startling fact is given. The viewer is left to guiltily conclude that this is entirely a moral failure -not at all evidence of grave flaws in the world economic order, of disparities of power, of gross inequality, of how the able-bodied react to polio when they no longer feel personally threatened by the disease. The tone is reassuring: the triumphant science of the world's wealthy nations is now addressing this issue.

In the end, the subtitle of this documentary reveals its major weakness. The producers evidently think that they have told The Story of Polio. And evidently the story of polio does not include survivors dealing with post-polio syndrome. Why would that phenomenon not be a part of the story of polio? Here is clear evidence that a supposedly objective view seems to merely reflect the fact that from the perspective of able-bodied Americans the story of polio ends with vaccination. At best the producers of *A Paralyzing Fear* have contributed to a story of polio which others can build on, if they do not accept the unexamined assumptions of this documentary.

Many scholars in this postmodern era would argue that the effort to create a master narrative is not only mistaken, but inevitably self-serving and oppressive to those it inevitably excludes. For too long, historians have failed to see that they have constructed a master narrative that excludes and silences disabled individuals - a narrative that unreflectively privileges the history of the able-bodied as the history of humanity. Revisioning history to include the disability experience will inevitably provide new perspectives on important historical issues. *A Paralyzing Fear* makes a gesture in this direction. It will be necessary for other scholars and documentarians to go beyond gesture. Just as

historians have realized, for example, that the history of men is not the history of humanity, it will be necessary for historians to realize that the history of the able-bodied is also not the history of humanity. Then just as women's history has changed the way we understand the past, disability history will also help change how we see virtually all of history. Oral history interviews can make a major contribution to this revisioning of history, but as *A Paralyzing Fear* demonstrates oral history done without thinking about disability as having a history will not contribute to this goal.